The benefits of sport extend past the exercise

A sociology professor from Iceland sees clear links between participation in sport and the prevention of substance abuse

by Michael Herborn

Children can benefit enormously from sport, argues Icelandic sociology professor, Thorulfur Thorlindsson. The physical and mental benefits of sport extend way past the exercise and can help prevent doping and reduce smoking amongst young people.

Thorlindsson, a professor of Sociology at the University of Iceland, has spent decades researching the impact of sport on Icelandic society, and has found the physical and mental benefits of sport to be far stronger than just exercise.

His research has shown that playing sport on a regular basis is one of the three key factors in stopping children from becoming involved in doping. The other two are quality time with one’s family and abstaining from alcohol until the late teenage years.

Sport prevents substance abuse

While the problem of doping in sport has received much attention in the press, doping outside of sport is in fact a more widespread problem in Iceland, says Thorlindsson.

“For adolescents, the use of steroids is slightly more common among those who do not take part in organised sport in Iceland. Steroids are a bigger problem outside sport than inside sport.”

One of the reasons for this is that while sports coaches teach children about the dangers of doping, very little education or awareness of the problem exists outside of this context. This makes it much harder to deal with steroid abuse outside of sport, accounting for the difference between user levels.

The benefits are not limited to persuading children not to use steroids. Research carried out by Thorlindsson showed a negative correlation between sport and the use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

“Sport participation among young people played a key role in reducing smoking in Iceland,” believes Thorlindsson, who has also found a linear relation between smoking and sports participation among adults, with more sport meaning less smoking.

No character building

However, contrary to received wisdom, Thorlindsson’s research has not shown that sport builds character.

“Several research projects I have done over time have never supported this. Sport reveals character in many ways and sport produces characters in many ways with the help of media.”

“This is what makes sport a special institution. Sport is about values, it is about norms. That is what defines the system of sport.”

Implicit in that description of sport is the role sport plays in society in general, offering a medium for communities to come together.

“Sport is a wonderful thing to break the isolation of the self,” says Thorlindsson. “Sport provides people with a shared focus and a shared world.”

Sport in the right context

However, it must be the right kind of sport. When sport is something children are forced to do by adults, the element of play is missing, which is essential for keeping people interested in sport.

“We must guard against complacency and assume that sport in all contexts is good.

“We have taken competition to an extreme level when it comes to sport,” warns Thorlindsson. “The culture, the value, the society that they live in, has undermined some of the athletes.”

Nonetheless, sport played for enjoyment by children has proved to be an important weapon in the fight against doping in Iceland, as well reinforcing positive norms and values in society as a whole.

“Research by Thorlindsson has shown that playing sport on a regular basis is one of the key factors in stopping children from becoming involved in doping.”

Tetyana Snopko, Journalist PAN Football Magazine, Ukraine